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BOOK REVIEW

Mark Coeckelbergh: Environmental Skill: Motivation, Knowledge, and the Possibility of a Non-romantic Environmental Ethics

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In *Environmental Skill: Motivation, Knowledge, and the Possibility of a Non-Romantic Environmental Ethics*, Mark Coeckelbergh addresses what he takes to be "the main problem of environmental ethics" (p. 1): the problem that even though we know what we should do for the environment, a gap persists between our knowledge and our action. Though we know, for instance, that we should eat less meat, bike to work, and generally consume less, compared to what we know we ought to do, the changes we make in our lives are likely "disappointingly small" (p. xiii). Coeckelbergh traces this problem to the context of environmental thinking and environmental ethics that are both thoroughly steeped in romanticism and enlightenment reason. He argues that these modern ways in which we know and relate to our environment only serve to alienate us from it: they condition us either to yearn for authentic nature and wilderness or to strive to control it through study, efficient management, and manipulation. Thus, both ways of thinking enforce a dualism between human culture and nonhuman nature, which lies at the root of our failure to act, despite all we know about global environmental degradation and our complicity in it. Coeckelbergh envisions a way to bridge this gap between knowledge and action, what he terms the "problem of environmental motivation" (p. 43), through the notion of environmental skill: know-*how* cultivated from our current practices. We might "literally revive environmental ethics" (p. 100) by shifting away from theoretical knowledge (knowing-*that*) and abstract moral

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principles towards direct, embodied, and involved practices, habits, and skills (know-*how*). Moreover, the notion of environmental skill avoids the two problematically alienating tendencies of contemporary environmental thought—romanticism and enlightenment reason—because it arises out of our practices and "environmental *habitus*" (p. 200), wherein we are already engaged and involved.

Before discussing Coeckelbergh's argument for environmental skill, we should note that he draws on dozens of thinkers, ranging from classical philosophy (Plato, Socrates, Augustine) to distinctly modern authors (Rousseau, Thoreau), and further enlists authors in the phenomenological and pragmatic tradition (Heidegger, Dewey, Sennett, Dreyfus), aesthetics and anthropology (Berleant, Ingold), environmental psychology (Azjen, Kuhl, Festinger, and Carlsmith), environmental philosophy (Cafaro, Sandler, Singer), and philosophy of technology (Dreyfus, Illich, Borgmann). As a consequence of this scope, the reader should neither expect in-depth dialogues concerning the full oeuvres of these authors, nor a general introduction to their work. Rather, Coeckelbergh discusses them insofar as their work relates to his question concerning the previously mentioned problem of environmental motivation and associated (lack of) environmental skill. This also means that the book hardly enters into existing scholarly discussions about these authors. For example, in Chapter 6, Coeckelbergh discusses Heidegger in light of environmental philosophy without making reference to scholars who have done extensive work on this topic, e.g., Michael Zimmerman or Thomas Sheehan. The overall advantage of Coeckelbergh's approach is that the reader is provided with an impressive amount of material. The drawback is that Coeckelbergh's accounts of these views, which are, of necessity, simplifications, at times become over-simplifications. To take Heidegger as an example once more, Coeckelbergh claims that Heidegger's notion of 'being-in-the-world' implies that "we cannot have an objective standpoint" (p. 52). This is not entirely accurate, as Heidegger would not deny the possibility of an objective standpoint, but rather he shows that this already involves a specific mode of accessing beings. Nuances like this are occasionally lost due to the broad setup of Coeckelbergh's approach. Another consequence of the broad scope that concerns this review specifically is that we are unable to address all the topics that Coeckelbergh does. We will therefore limit our discussion to a number of questions pertaining to the book's primary contribution: Coeckelbergh's notion of environmental skill.

Coeckelbergh takes inspiration for his ethic of environmental skill from the kind of engagement found in craftsmanship. By interpreting and building on the work of (among others) Dreyfus, Sennett, Pirsig, and Crawford, he focusses on skilled engagement, which instead of modern "reason and feeling detached from the environment," moves towards "thinking and feeling that grow out of one's engagement with the environment" (p. 179). The craftsman embodies this: his craft takes shape out of a continuous responding to the invitations and the challenges of his environment. This kind of engagement is important to Coeckelbergh because, unlike modern subjectivity, the craftsman's "skilled work leads to absorption, a kind of 'focal awareness'" (p. 103), which avoids the problem of motivation altogether. Coeckelbergh's solution to this problem with regard to environmental action, then, is to revise the current practices in which we are already engaged so

that we cultivate environmental skills by them. He writes: "We can bridge the gap between knowledge and action; in skilled activity, we are already moved and "internally" motivated" (p. 201), and "theoretical knowledge alone does not motivate; paradoxically, we have to *move* in order to become more motivated" (p. 97). Because we are already engaged and motivated in our practices, we can use them to generate environmental skills that we will then be motivated to enact. In the book's fourth and final part, Coeckelbergh discusses several such practices, evaluating each in light of the environmental skills they should foster. He is particularly successful at identifying a number of practices that are some of the most significant ways we engage with and experience our environments. Yet, this poses a difficulty for the section. Walking, food culture, energy use, relations with non-human animals, etc. are practices so rich, diverse, and historically and culturally embedded that they have merited many of their own book-length treatments. Such multi-dimensionality is not easily condensed and assessed as a single practice, so it is not surprising that Coeckelbergh's characterizations at times slip into caricature. His comparison of birdwatching and hunting stands out as an example. Here, he positions the birdwatcher as a voyeur who aims to detach himself from his observational gaze as much as possible: the birdwatcher "wants to see the bird from the point of *nowhere*. He wants to be invisible" (p. 143). The hunter, by comparison, is "far more *engaged,*" because in hunting, "body and mind are intensely related to the environment" (p. 144). We wonder, in the first place, if such undifferentiated characterizations of the respective practices are empirically adequate, and in the second place, how they can advance the proper evaluation of the practices Coeckelbergh wants us to undertake.

However, his longer discussions are more instructive. The practice of walking, for instance, receives the most extensive treatment, and Coeckelbergh's reflections and evaluations here are especially interesting. Building on Lee and Ingold's work, Coeckelbergh offers four environmental skills: "appropriate attention, rooted reflection, open sensation, and social talking" (p. 142), which should be used to evaluate and re-envision the practice of walking and steer it away from possible enlightenment and romantic modes (e.g., of pure instrumental navigation or of pastoral retreat). Coeckelbergh's aim in this section is not to uphold some practices as exemplars of environmental skill cultivation while forbidding others but to provide a way to "evaluate the "how"" of current practices and the kind of "relation to the environment they shape and constitute" (p. 143). Nor does he aim to provide a definitive evaluation of each of our practices in light of environmental skill but to demonstrate how such an evaluation works and to encourage and instruct us to begin our own. However, can such evaluations and ensuing revision of practices to cultivate environmental skill actually do away with the problem of environmental motivation, as Coeckelbergh seems to suggest? Is it the case that in a situation of perfect environmental skill, i.e., where we achieve totally skilled environmental engagement, our problem of environmental motivation would cease to exist, as it does for the craftsman, absorbed in her skilled work? Consider the example of eating less meat that Coeckelbergh mentioned when illustrating the problem of environmental motivation. Many of us know *that* we should eat less meat, but we fail to align our eating habits with our intentions. According to

Coeckelbergh, this calls for an examination of our general practices of eating by paying attention to the culture that surrounds food and the relations to the environment it sponsors. Our examinations should be guided by the cultivation of the environmental skills of (1) appropriate attention, (2) rooted reflection, (3) open sensation, and (4) social talking, instead of limited to questions about the production of the meat or its environmental impact (p. 162). One can imagine a practice of eating that cultivates all of these environmental skills—of becoming more engaged in the environment by participating in the local agricultural community; eating in season; perhaps even raising and butchering one's own animals (in his evaluation of Food and Eating Skills, Coeckelbergh praises the conviviality of the Slow Food movement (p. 164), for instance). But what becomes of our intention to eat less meat? Would the problem of environmental motivation regarding eating less meat we experience in our current practice dissipate in this hypothetical practice of totally skilled environmental engagement? If so, *how* would we be moved to eat less meat? If not, we would then have to admit that living a life of excellent environmental skill will not necessarily alleviate the environmental problems that motivated Coeckelbergh's account in the first place. Hence, although it offers the possibility of confronting the problem of environmental motivation in an original and interesting way, the notion of environmental skill also seems to allow for the possibility of simply sidestepping this problem.

A more general question concerns Coeckelbergh's understanding of modernity and the notion of environmental skill as a way of overcoming modern ways of thinking (p. 175). One of the strong points of Coeckelbergh's diagnosis is that it deepens the discussions regarding environmental concerns and the problem of motivation by laying bare the modern roots of these phenomena. In light of his diagnosis, however, it remains somewhat ambiguous what kind of relation is called for with respect to modernity. On the one hand, Coeckelbergh suggests that modernity as such must be surpassed: "we have to move beyond a dualistic approach altogether" (p. 113). On the other hand, he also suggests that we need only avoid the "grotesque and problematic forms" of modernity, i.e., "the detached, alienating kind of rationality, emotionality, and imagination that can be found in rationalist and romantic thinking," which are problematic insofar as they "alienate us from our environment" (p. 114). This leaves open the question regarding the status of modernity, as well as whether and how environmental skill can be said to be move towards a "non-modern environmentalism" (p. 205).

It is only in the final chapter that Coeckelbergh explicitly turns to this issue, although he never fully alleviates the tension. He makes clear that modernity is not some mantle that we can simply discard. Rather, "we are part of modernity," i.e., "modernity is in the form of our actions, our words, our bodies, our comportment, our technologies, our thinking, and our experience. We *modernize*, so to speak" (p. 204). In other words, insofar as it involves our doing and thinking, our environment *is* modern. At the same time, Coeckelbergh sees modernity as the deeper source of disengagement and associated environmental and motivational concerns. This suggests that while we are situated in modernity, we are also able to take a perspective that allows us to oversee and question it (as Coeckelbergh does at length), and further, that we are even able to move towards the outskirts of

modernity through a skillful engagement that less is modern (p. 183), or even non-modern (p. 179). If geared towards a non-modern approach, however, it remains up for discussion whether Coeckelbergh's notion of environmental skill must not fundamentally and necessarily remain contaminated with modernity. There are three reasons for this: first, as already noted in the discussion of environmental skill in relation to food, one can wonder whether the move from skillful practice (e.g., surrounding eating) towards this practice in a way that yields environmental skill (e.g., attention, reflection, open sensation, and social talking) must not necessarily invoke a modern, disengaged element in terms of theories concerning energy use in food production and consumption. Second, we wonder how evaluation of a current practice can avoid turning the practice into an object of evaluation, which would require us to be at least temporarily disengaged from the practice. Third, must such evaluation not occur in light of the thing that calls for such evaluation in the first place, which has to be the global environmental crisis in one way or another? As Coeckelbergh himself notes in the chapters on environmental psychology, the environmental crisis is not something prominently present in the phenomenology of daily experience and therefore "is mainly indirect" (p. 36). In other words, only a highly modern techno-scientific perspective on the environment renders it a single entity in critical condition. Hence, although Coeckelbergh is acutely aware of the way our environmental experience is modern, it remains up for further discussion to what extent the notion of environmental skill can be pitted against or 'beyond' this modernity.

Finally, it is clear that Coeckelbergh does not intend *Environmental Skill* as a new conceptual design that now needs to be put to work. Rather his emphasis on skillful practice shows that modernity cannot be surpassed by applying a newly drawn up blueprint, since such a focus on application actually reifies a distinctively modern, voluntarist position (p. 129, p. 204). He therefore he calls upon philosophers to accompany moral-environmental change. On the one hand, this involves "skills of conversation and criticism" (p. 210). This is what the task of philosophy is often taken to be, and indeed, we situate our review here: the points of discussion we have raised are meant not simply as criticisms but as attempts to engage in further dialogue concerning the notion of environmental skill and its implications. On the other hand, next to the requirement of conversation and criticism, Coeckelbergh stresses the need for "moral environmental midwifery," i.e., that philosophy "assists in the birth of better environmental practices by enhancing moral-environmental know-how … thus contributing to the growth of 'environmental skill'" (p. 210). Accordingly, although we maintain that there are a number of methodological and theoretical questions in the book that stand in need of further discussion, we must also recognize Coeckelbergh's insight that such discussion may overlook an important aspect of the notion of environmental skill, which is to say the dimension of skillful engagement or know-*how* that cannot be reduced to theoretical knowing-*that*. Coeckelbergh can and perhaps should be read as practicing what he preaches: *Environmental Skill* is a demonstration that even the practice of environmental philosophy might be evaluated and steered away from its modern preoccupations towards the cultivation of greater engagement and therefore environmental skill. In this way, Coeckelbergh's book stands as a reminder that

practicing environmental philosophy always means relating to one's environment in a certain way and that questioning and skillfully dealing with this relation remains an ongoing task.